AMAR CHITRA KATHA

No. 37

ASHOKA

THE LIFE OF A GREAT SON OF INDIA, AS DEPICTED IN THE PALI TEXTS



AMAR CHITRA KATHA

History chronicles innumerable kings who were brave conquerors and valiant soldiers. But Ashoka stands above them all because he is the only one who at the zenith of his conquests saw the futility of violence and had the courage to renounce it. That is why, H.G. Wells in his 'Short History of The World' says that Ashoka's "reign for eight and twenty years was one of the brightest interludes in the troubled history of mankind." Wells goes on to say, "Such was Ashoka, the greatest of kings. He was far in advance of his age."

This volume is based on the original research of the author into Mahavamsa, Dipavamsa, Commentary on Mahavamsa, and the edicts of Ashoka. Pali manuscripts and other secondary sources have also been extensively studied in gleaning facts which should kindle a new interest in Ashoka.

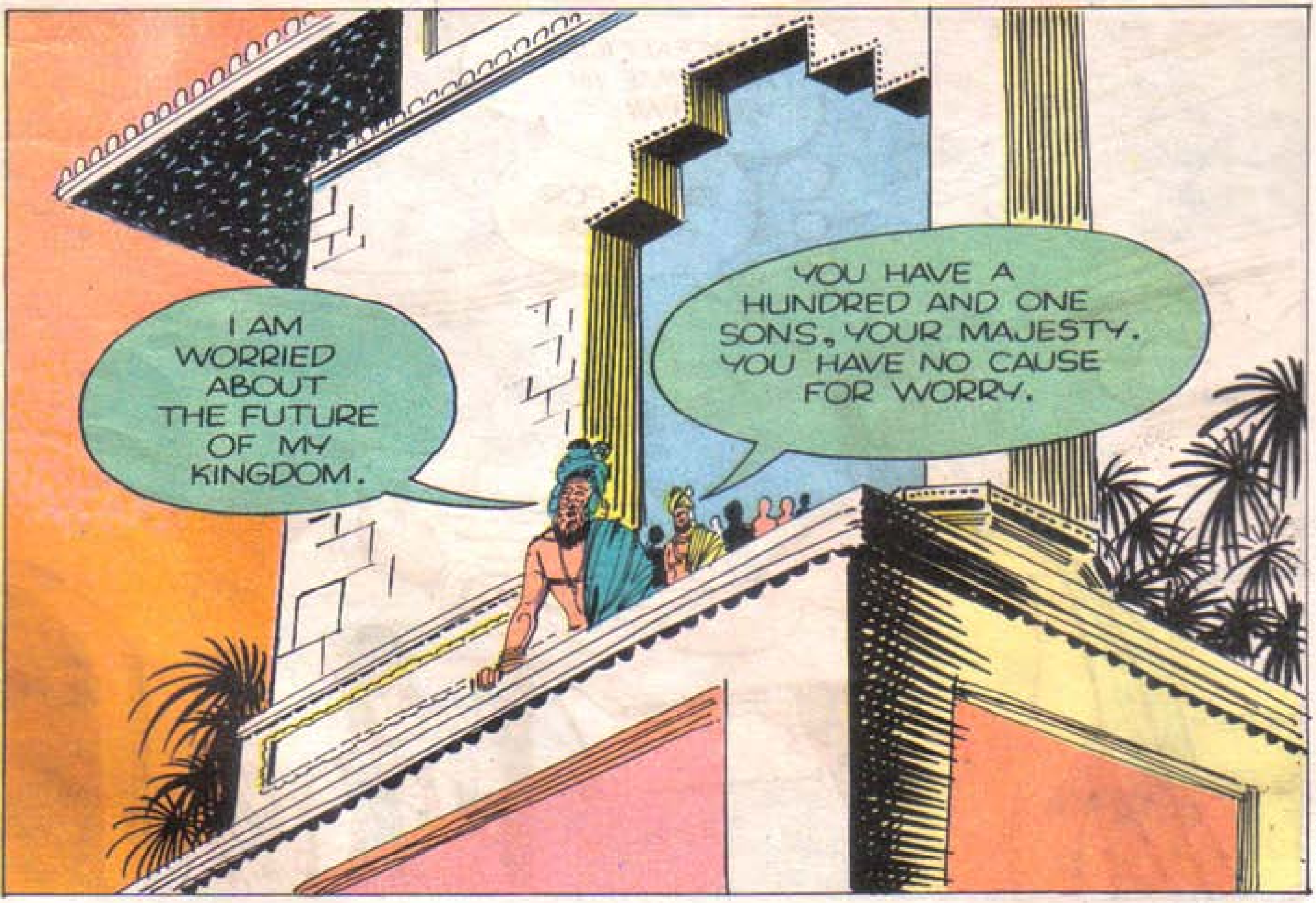
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ASHOKA
ASHOKA WAS THE SON OF KING BINDUSARA WHO RULED INDIA FROM HIS CAPITAL OF PATALIPUTRA IN THE THIRD CENTURY B.C. HE EXCELLED HIS BROTHERS IN THE ART OF WAR. THEREFORE, WHEN A REBELLION BROKE OUT IN THE DISTANT PROVINCE OF TAXILA, HE WAS SENT TO SUPPRESS IT.

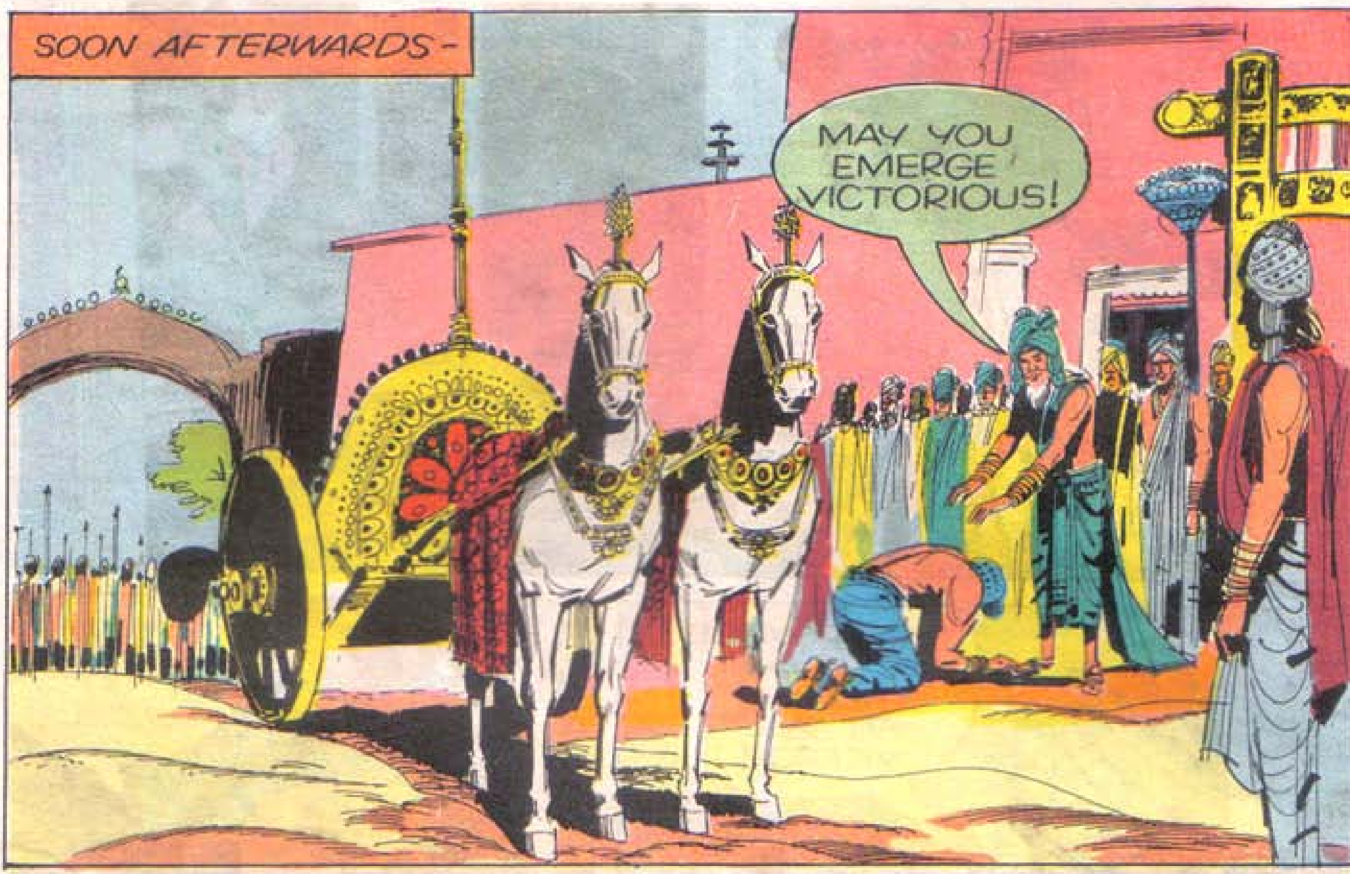

WEEKS LATER -
YOUR MAJESTY! WE HAVE HAPPY NEWS HERE. ASHOKA HAS SUCCESSFULLY PUT DOWN THE REBELS.
HE SHALL RULE THERE AS THE VICEROY. HE WILL KEEP PEACE THERE.
BINDUSARA HAD A HUNDRED SONS BESIDES ASHOKA. THEY WERE NOT HAPPY TO HEAR THE NEWS.
ASHOKA HAS ALWAYS BEEN PROUD. THE SUCCESS WILL GO TO HIS HEAD.
IT WILL MAKE HIM MORE ARROGANT.

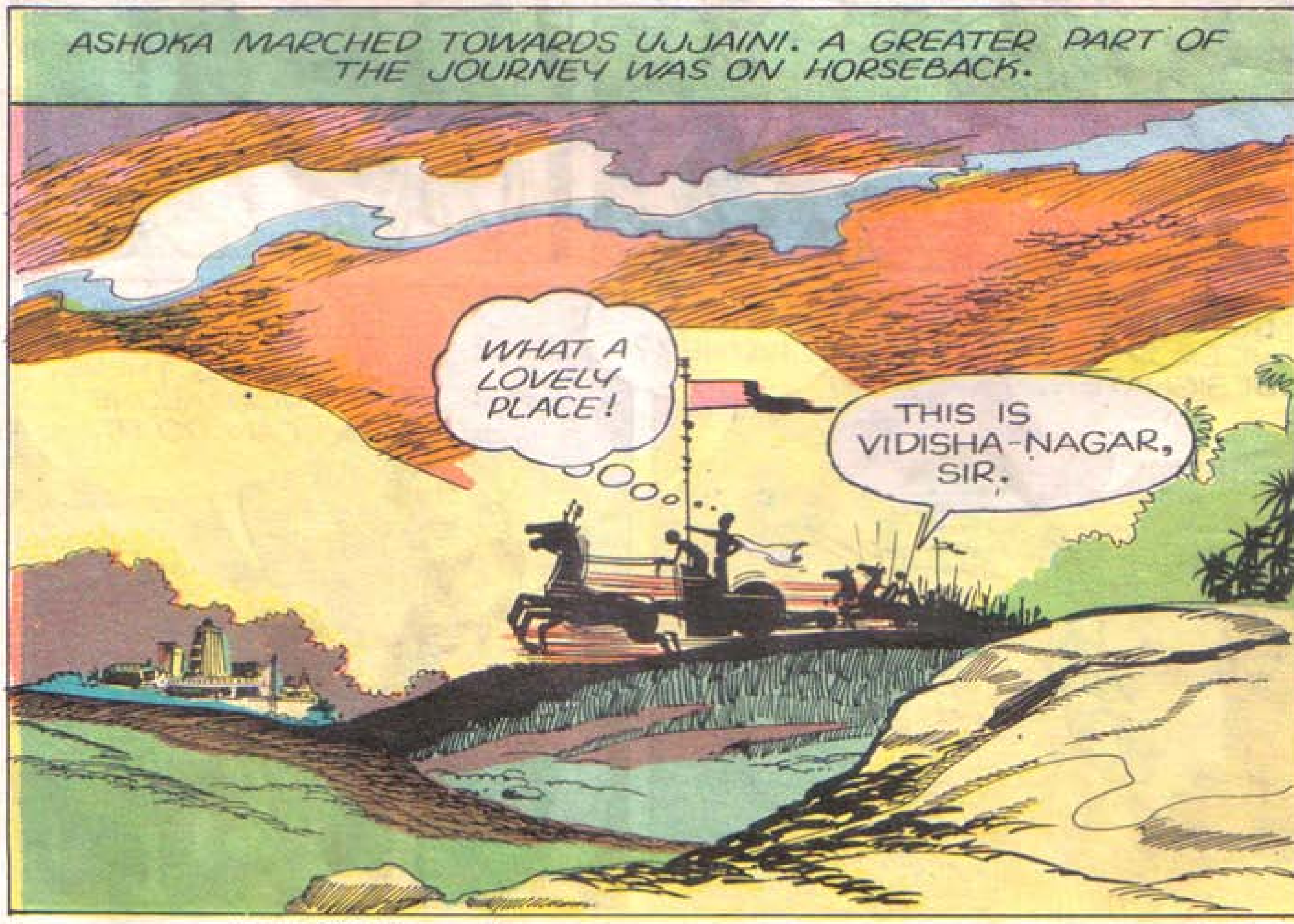

BUT THEY WERE UNHAPPIER STILL, WHEN THE KING RECALLED ASHOKA FROM TAXILA.
ASHOKA BACK IN THE CAPITAL. I DON'T LIKE IT.
ESPECIALLY WITH OUR OLD FATHER DEPENDING ON HIM.


I AM WORRIED ABOUT THE FUTURE OF MY KINGDOM.
YOU HAVE A HUNDRED AND ONE SONS, YOUR MAJESTY. YOU HAVE NO CAUSE FOR WORRY.


THAT IS EXACTLY WHAT WORRIES ME. ASHOKA IS RUTHLESS. HE MAY FIGHT WITH HIS BROTHERS FOR THE THRONE.
JUST THEN-
THERE IS A MESSENGER FROM UJJAINI, YOUR MAJESTY.
A REBELLION - THIS TIME IN UJJAINI.
SEND FOR ASHOKA.


FATHER, HERE I AM. I GOT YOUR MESSAGE.
THE PROVINCE OF UJJAINI NEEDS AN ABLE VICEROY.
I WOULD LOVE TO GO SOUTH.
BUT THE VICEROY DESIGNATE...
YES, FATHER?
...WILL HAVE TO CRUSH THE REBELS THERE. YOU ALONE CAN DO IT.


SOON AFTERWARDS-
MAY YOU EMERGE VICTORIOUS!

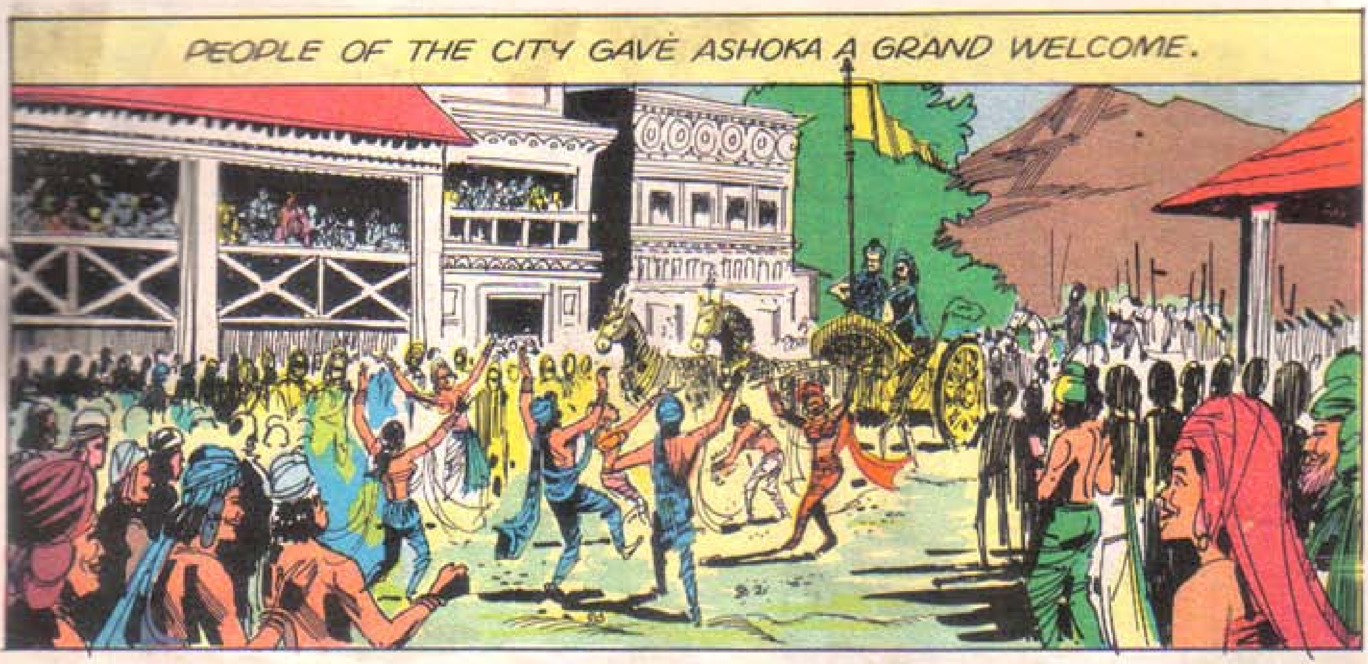

ASHOKA MARCHED TOWARDS UJJAINI. A GREATER PART OF THE JOURNEY WAS ON HORSEBACK.
WHAT A LOVELY PLACE!
THIS IS VIDISHA-NAGAR, SIR.


LET'S CAMP HERE FOR A WHILE. REST THE HORSES.
A LITTLE LATER-
ASHOKA WAS CHARMED BY THE BEAUTY OF THE LEADER OF THE GROUP.
EXCUSE ME, LADY. TO WHICH TEMPLE ARE YOU GOING?
WE ARE ON OUR WAY TO THE CHAITYA. NOT TO A TEMPLE.


THEN YOU ARE BUDDHISTS.
YES!
COME ON, VIDISHA. IT IS GETTING LATE.
VIDISHA!
VIDISHA! A NAME AS LOVELY AS THIS PLACE. AND SUCH CHARMING EYES!
FIND OUT WHO HER PARENTS ARE. I WANT TO MEET THEM.
WHOSE PARENTS, SIR?
VIDISHA'S.


ASHOKA'S MESSENGER SOON RETURNED.
SIR! SHE IS THE DAUGHTER OF A REPUTED SHRESHTHI'S* FAMILY.
TELL THE SHRESHTHI! I WANT TO MEET HIM.
*MERCHANT
LATER-
SHRESHTHI, IF YOU PLEASE, I...
SIR, IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WANT ME TO DO FOR YOU?
I'VE NEVER SEEN OUR PRINCE HESITATE THUS.
I...YES. I WANT THE HAND OF YOUR DAUGHTER IN MARRIAGE.
I AM HONOURED, SIR.


AFTER A QUICK WEDDING, HE PROCEEDED TOWARDS UJJAINI ALONG WITH VIDISHA.
ASHOKA, A GREAT WARRIOR, IN NO TIME ROUTED THE REBELS.
THE REBELS LAID DOWN THEIR ARMS.


PEOPLE OF THE CITY GAVE ASHOKA A GRAND WELCOME.


IN THE PALACE GARDENS LATER–
THIS IS AN OCCASION FOR REJOICING, VIDISHA. BUT YOU LOOK SAD.
I DISLIKE KILLING... EVEN IN BATTLES... ESPECIALLY BY YOU.


THAT'S SILLY. YOU SAY IT, BECAUSE YOU ARE A BUDDHIST, I AM NOT.


I AM A KSHATRIYA KING. MY DUTY ENJOINS KILLING IF NEED BE.
WHAT ABOUT BIMBISARA? HE TOO WAS A KING. HE FOUND PEACE IN THE TEACHINGS OF BUDDHA.


THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ASHOKA AND VIDISHA PERSISTED. MONTHS LATER, WHEN VIDISHA GAVE BIRTH TO A SON-
A SON! I AM VERY HAPPY. I WILL NAME HIM *MAHINDRA. HE WILL CONQUER THE ENTIRE WORLD.
I WISH, HE CONQUERS THE HEARTS OF MEN AS PRINCE SIDDHARTHA DID.

*MAHI = WORLD


TWO YEARS LATER, VIDISHA GAVE BIRTH TO A DAUGHTER.
LORD! THIS TIME, LET ME CHOOSE THE NAME.
AS YOU WISH.
I'LL NAME HER SANGHA-MITRA.
OH, NO! THAT'S A BUDDHIST NAME.
ONE DAY, A MESSENGER CAME FROM PATALIPUTRA.
HIS MAJESTY HAS NOT BEEN KEEPING GOOD HEALTH. PLEASE RETURN TO PATALIPUTRA IMMEDIATELY.


ASHOKA HAD HURRIED CONSULTATIONS WITH VIDISHA.
I HAVE RECEIVED A MESSAGE FROM THE CHIEF MINISTER. MY FATHER IS ILL. I HAVE TO RUSH TO PATALIPUTRA...
...AND YOU AREN'T YET FIT TO ACCOMPANY ME.
WILL YOU STAY AT VIDISHA-NAGAR WITH YOUR PARENTS? I'LL SEND FOR YOU LATER.
AS YOU WISH, MY LORD!
TOGETHER THEY TRAVELLED UPTO VIDISHA-NAGAR.


PLEASE TAKE CARE OF YOUR HEALTH. AND DON'T PREACH NON-VIOLENCE TO MY MAHINDRA.
I WANT HIM TO BE A KING OF KINGS.
BEFORE I LEAVE, IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WANT ME TO DO?
YES. BUT GIVE ME YOUR WORD THAT YOU WILL.
I WILL. WHAT IS IT?
I WANT YOU TO SHUN VIOLENCE OF ALL KINDS.


AT PATALIPUTRA, ASHOKA WAS RECEIVED BY THE CHIEF MINISTER.
PRINCE! YOUR FATHER IS NO MORE. AND YOUR BROTHERS ARE FIGHTING AMONGST THEMSELVES FOR THE THRONE.
THE THRONE! IT IS MINE! I HAVE EARNED THE RIGHT TO IT.
ASHOKA FORGOT ALL ABOUT THE PROMISE HE HAD MADE TO VIDISHA.


ASHOKA WAS RUTHLESS IN KILLING ALL THOSE THAT CHALLENGED HIS RIGHT TO THE THRONE. SUMANADEVI, WIFE OF ONE OF HIS BROTHERS, WAS EXPECTING A BABY AT THE TIME.
PRINCESS! I FEAR FOR THE LIFE OF THE UNBORN CHILD.
DO YOU SUGGEST THAT I RUN AWAY FROM HERE? BUT WHERE CAN I GO?


I CAN SHOW YOU A SECRET DOOR. YOU CAN ESCAPE INTO THE WOODS.


ESCAPING FROM THE PALACE, SUMANADEVI WANDERED IN THE FOREST.


AN OLD MAN, WHO WAS PASSING BY, TOOK PITY ON HER.
IF YOU COME WITH ME TO MY VILLAGE, I WILL ARRANGE FOR YOUR STAY.
SHE ACCOMPANIED HIM. WHILE THEY WERE ON THEIR WAY—
NO! I CANNOT WALK ANY FARTHER.
DON'T WORRY, DAUGHTER! MY HOME IS CLOSE BY. I'LL FETCH MY WIFE. YOU REST UNDER THIS NIGRODHA TREE.
IT WAS UNDER THAT NIGRODHA TREE THAT A BOY WAS BORN TO SUMANADEVI.
LET'S CALL HIM NIGRODHA KUMAR.
NIGRODHA KUMAR GREW UP IN THAT VILLAGE AND BECAME A MONK AT A VERY TENDER AGE.


MEANWHILE, ASHOKA HAD BECOME A POWERFUL KING. AT HIS COURT –
MINISTER, IS MY KINGDOM PEACEFUL? ARE THE BORDERS QUIET?
YES, YOUR MAJESTY. EVEN TAXILA AND UJJAINI ARE QUIET.
STILL WE SHOULD NOT REST TILL KALINGA IS CONQUERED.
WHY YOUR MAJESTY?
IT IS INDEPENDENT TODAY AND MAY RAISE ITS HEAD ANY MOMENT.
WAR IT WILL HAVE TO BE.
COMMANDER! PREPARE FOR THE BATTLE.

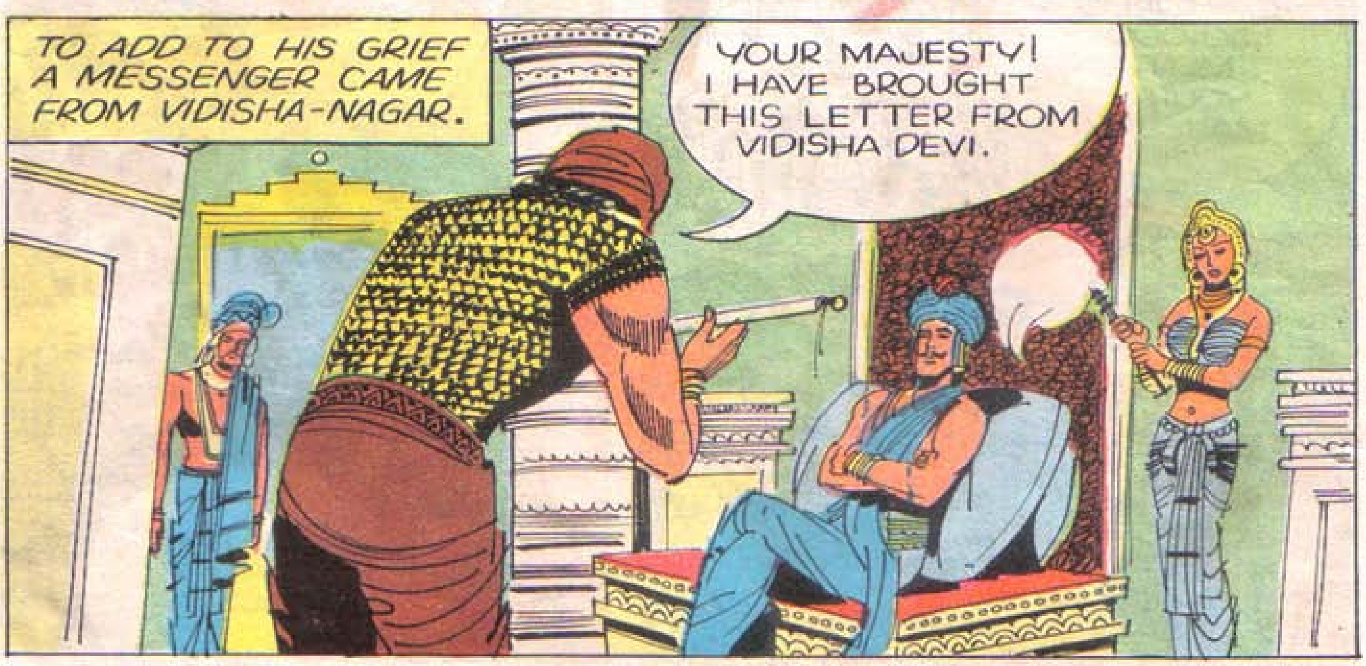

ASHOKA'S ARMY INVADED KALINGA.
THE SOLDIERS OF KALINGA FOUGHT BRAVELY.
AT LAST—
WE HAVE WON. KALINGA IS OURS.
I SHALL VISIT KALINGA.


AS HE PROCEEDED, HE SAW HORRIBLE SIGHTS.
HEAPS OF DEAD MEN! WE HAVE KILLED MANY.
OVER 1,00,000 MEN TO BE PRECISE, YOUR MAJESTY.
MERCY! WE BEG FOR MERCY!
WE HAVE CAPTURED 1,50,000 MEN, YOUR MAJESTY.
AS ASHOKA MOVED FARTHER-
IT LOOKS DESOLATE HERE.
LAKHS HAVE DIED, YOUR MAJESTY.


HE SAW THE SUFFERINGS OF THE PEOPLE.
OH! NO!


LET'S RETURN.


IN THE PALACE—
YOUR MAJESTY! AREN'T YOU WELL?
I HAVE LOST MY PEACE OF MIND.


TO ADD TO HIS GRIEF A MESSENGER CAME FROM VIDISHA-NAGAR.
YOUR MAJESTY! I HAVE BROUGHT THIS LETTER FROM VIDISHA DEVI.

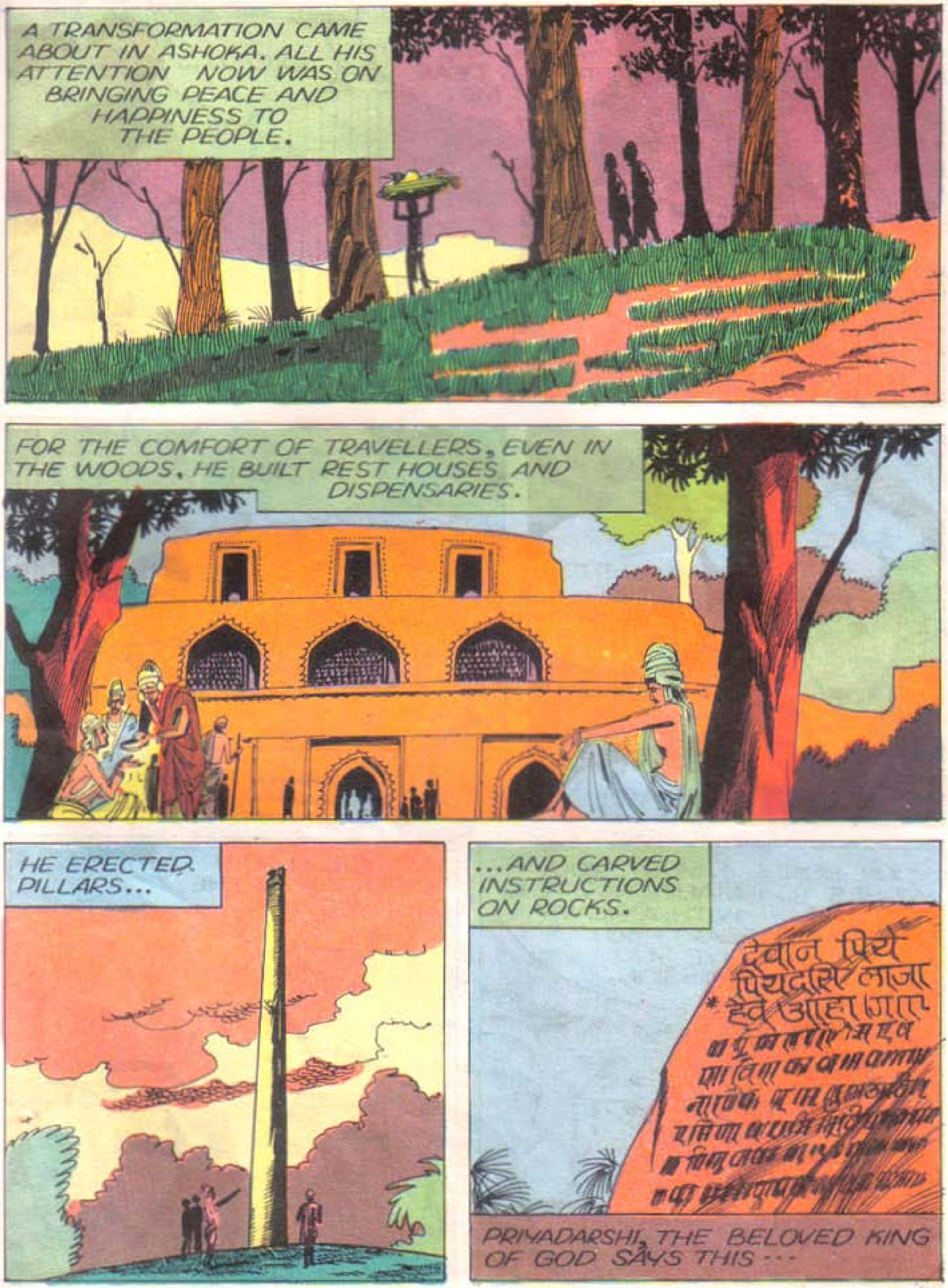


Arya putra,
you have broken
the promise. I am
sending the children
to you. Please look
after them properly.
Yours
WHERE IS VIDISHA?
SHE PLANS TO JOIN THE SANGHA OF BUDDHA.
ASHOKA DREW SOME COMFORT FROM THE PRESENCE OF HIS CHILDREN. BUT HE CONTINUED TO BROOD OVER THE KILLINGS.
ONE DAY, FROM HIS PALACE WINDOW, HE SAW A MONK PASSING ALONG THE ROAD.
WHO CAN THIS BE? WHY DO I FEEL DRAWN TOWARDS HIM?


GO! QUICK! REQUEST THAT MONK TO COME HERE.
WHEN THE MONK CAME —
VENERABLE ONE, WHO ARE YOU?
DON'T YOU SEE, WHO I AM? A BUDDHIST MONK.
MAY I KNOW YOUR NAME, PLEASE?
MY MOTHER CALLED ME NIGRODHA KUMAR.
NIGRODHA KUMAR! I KNOW, THAT IS THE NAME OF MY BROTHER'S SON.
YES. I AM YOUR NEPHEW. I CAN GUESS WHAT IS GOING ON IN YOUR MIND.


YOU HATE ME. DON'T YOU?
WHY SHOULD I ? BECAUSE YOU KILLED MY FATHER ?
IS NOT THAT REASON ENOUGH TO HATE ANOTHER ?
NO. I LOVE ALL. HATRED IS DESTRUCTIVE. IT SHOUD BE CONQUERED BY LOVE.
PRAY, WHERE DID YOU LEARN THIS ? AT SUCH A TENDER AGE ?
FROM THE TEACHINGS OF LORD BUDDHA. THEY BRING PEACE TO TROUBLED MINDS.

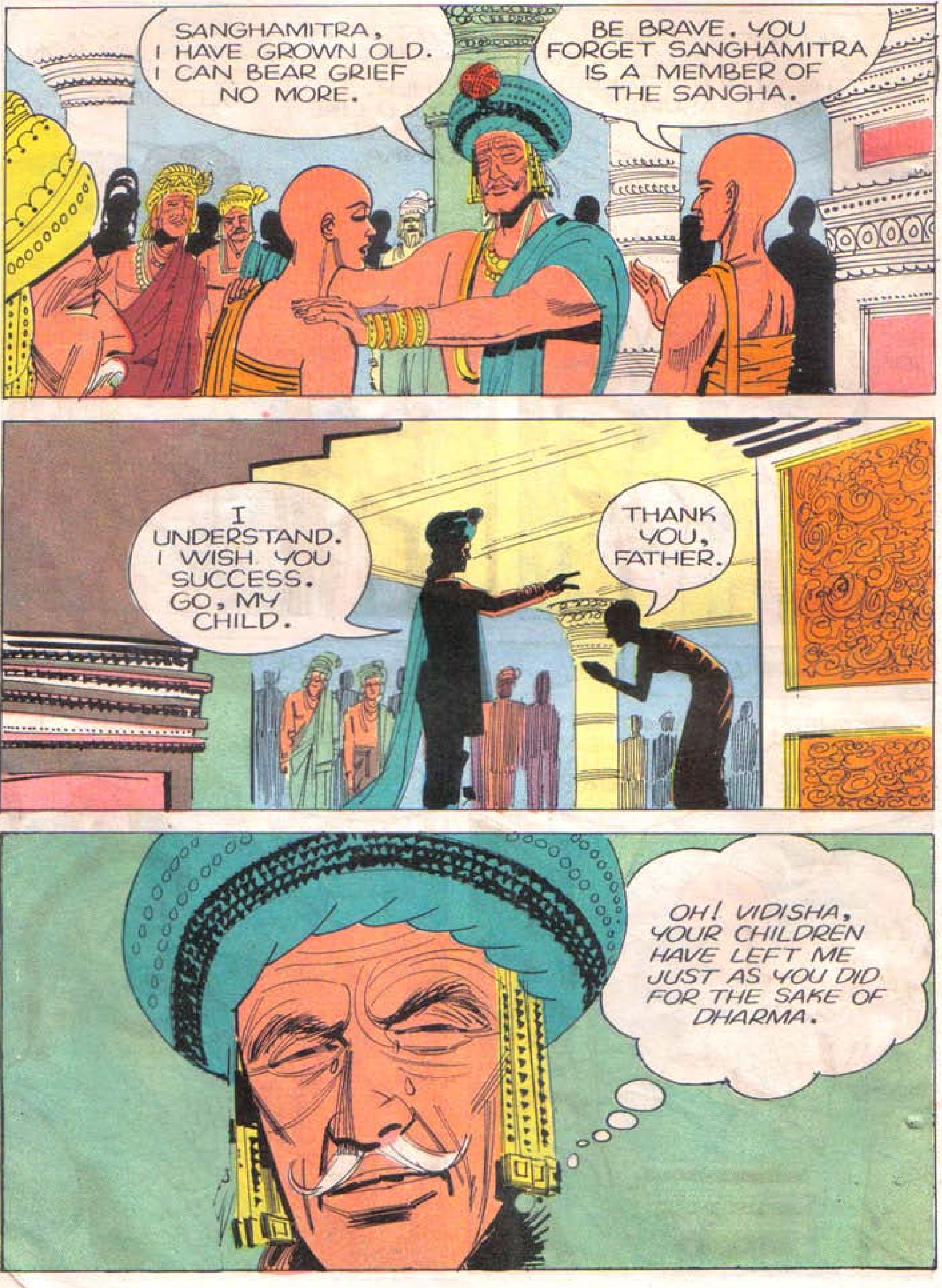

MY MIND HAS NOT KNOWN PEACE.
THEN SEEK REFUGE IN BUDDHA.
WILL YOU ACCEPT ME AS YOUR DISCIPLE?
YES. REPEAT AFTER ME... I TAKE REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA.
I TAKE REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA.
I TAKE REFUGE IN THE SANGHA.
I TAKE REFUGE IN THE DHARMA.



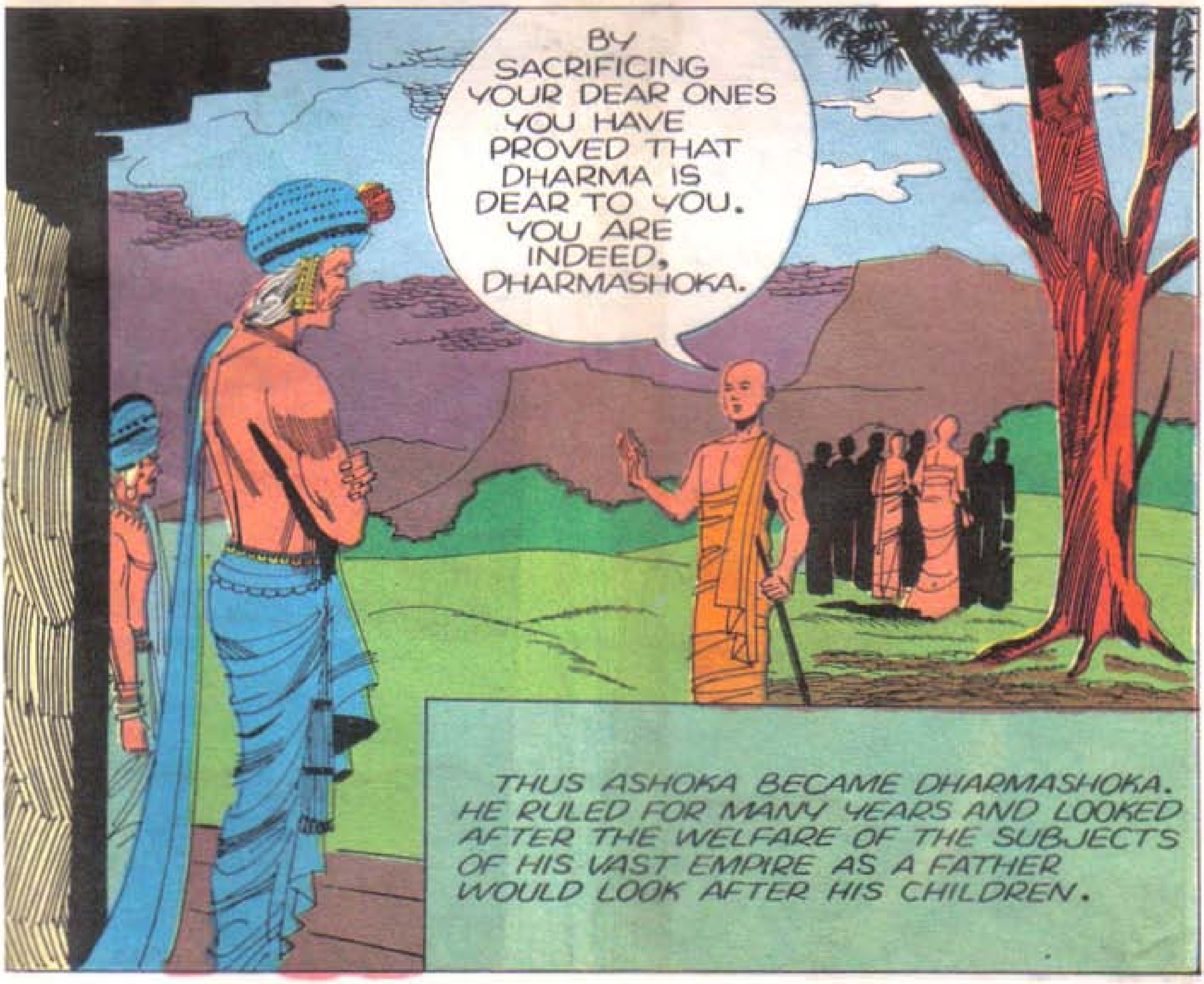
A TRANSFORMATION CAME ABOUT IN ASHOKA. ALL HIS ATTENTION NOW WAS ON BRINGING PEACE AND HAPPINESS TO THE PEOPLE.
FOR THE COMFORT OF TRAVELLERS, EVEN IN THE WOODS, HE BUILT REST HOUSES AND DISPENSARIES.
HE ERECTED PILLARS...
...AND CARVED INSTRUCTIONS ON ROCKS.
देवान प्रिये
पियदसि लाजा
हेवं आहा
PRIYADARSHI, THE BELOVED KING OF GOD SAYS THIS ---

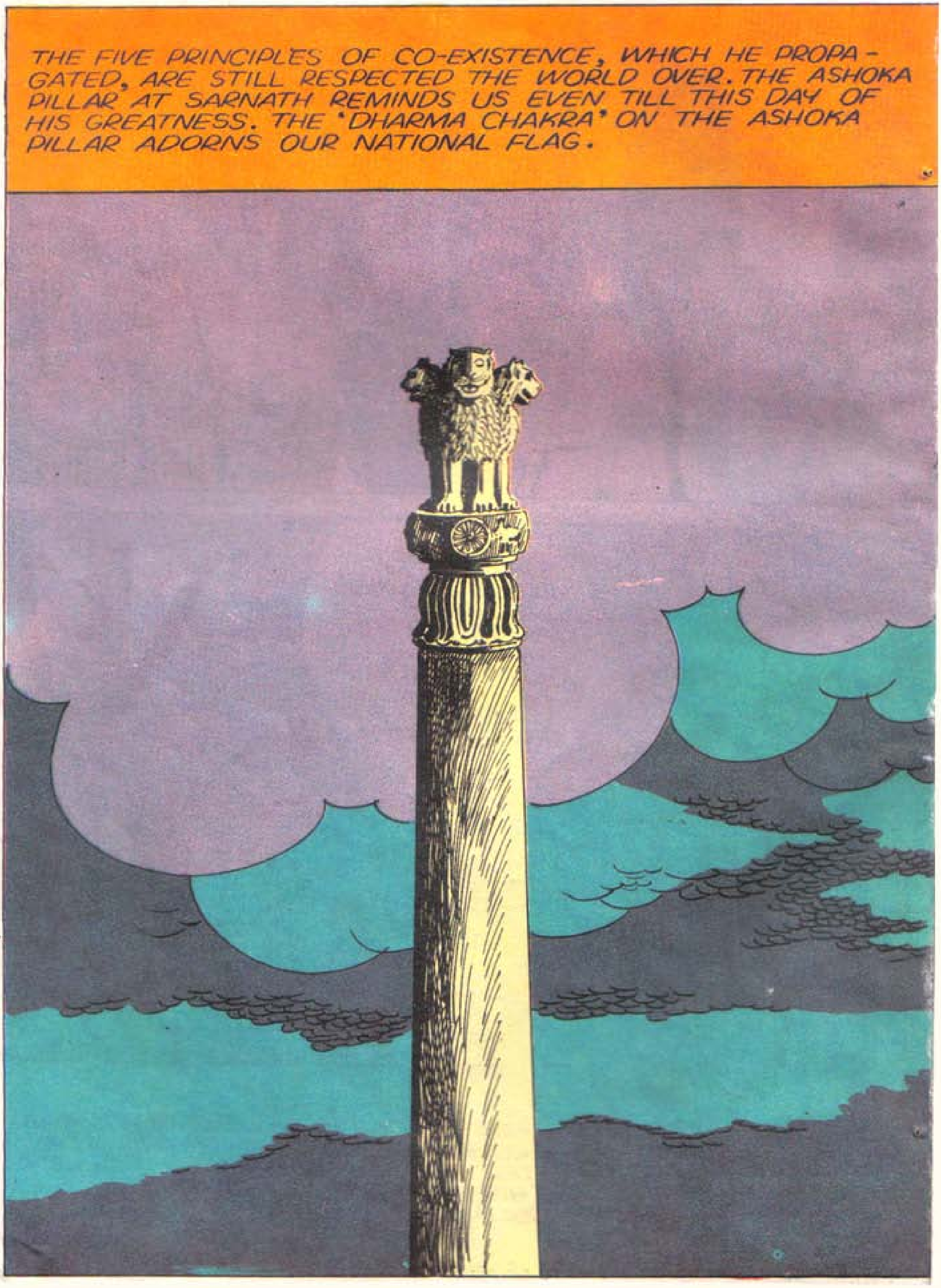

ONE DAY -
I HAVE GIVEN AWAY ALL THINGS DEAR TO ME.
EXCEPT...
EXCEPT WHAT, MAHINDRA?
YOUR CHILDREN.
YOUR SON WISHES TO JOIN THE SANGHA.
MUST YOU, MAHINDRA? IT IS WITH A HEAVY HEART - BUT I GIVE YOU PERMISSION.
FATHER, ALLOW ME TO JOIN THE NUNNERY.
OH! SANGHAMITRA!!


MY HUSBAND AND SON HAVE RENOUNCED THE WORLD. I TAKE NO PLEASURE IN LIFE.
YOU MAY JOIN THE NUNNERY.
AFTER A FEW YEARS—
FATHER, I WOULD LIKE TO GO TO LANKA.
GO, MY SON. GO WITH MY BLESSINGS.
TWO YEARS LATER—
FATHER, I HAVE COME TO BID YOU GOOD-BYE.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN, SANGHAMITRA?
A MESSAGE HAS BEEN RECEIVED FROM LANKA. THEY NEED NUNS AT THE MISSION.
HM...


SANGHAMITRA, I HAVE GROWN OLD. I CAN BEAR GRIEF NO MORE.
BE BRAVE. YOU FORGET SANGHAMITRA IS A MEMBER OF THE SANGHA.
I UNDERSTAND. I WISH YOU SUCCESS. GO, MY CHILD.
THANK YOU, FATHER.
OH! VIDISHA, YOUR CHILDREN HAVE LEFT ME JUST AS YOU DID FOR THE SAKE OF DHARMA.


DO NOT GRIEVE.


BY SACRIFICING YOUR DEAR ONES YOU HAVE PROVED THAT DHARMA IS DEAR TO YOU. YOU ARE INDEED, DHARMASHOKA.
THUS ASHOKA BECAME DHARMASHOKA. HE RULED FOR MANY YEARS AND LOOKED AFTER THE WELFARE OF THE SUBJECTS OF HIS VAST EMPIRE AS A FATHER WOULD LOOK AFTER HIS CHILDREN.


THE FIVE PRINCIPLES OF CO-EXISTENCE, WHICH HE PROPAGATED, ARE STILL RESPECTED THE WORLD OVER. THE ASHOKA PILLAR AT SARNATH REMINDS US EVEN TILL THIS DAY OF HIS GREATNESS. THE 'DHARMA CHAKRA' ON THE ASHOKA PILLAR ADORNS OUR NATIONAL FLAG.